

would excel in our finds, since the park was relatively unsatisfactory we might balance our leisure day economy by superior luck in our other vice – that of thrift shopping. We pulled up the white-gravel drive to a series of frontless buildings which served as the local junktique boutique. Sarah went for the records and I to the books, and the unmatched dishware languished alone.

The hardbacks were twenty-five cents each and I got four: *Family Exercise Book* by Imohotep Scott, *Scottish Mythology* by James Chisholm, *The Revenge of the Triangle* by Florence Ballard, and *Classical Mythology* by Morford and Lenardon. Sarah made out as well with two albums of 78 phonographs for her Phillips Cobramatic. And so we drove away into the burnt orange sunset of that happy Monday and beyond into the workaday world.

I didn't think of the madwoman at the spring for a week. Since I had resolved not to speak of it, it seemed to slip from my mind. I wonder if memory needs to be invoked orally as the ancient poets used to do? It was Sunday night and we were plotting our Monday adventure. I suggested we visit the park again. Sarah was surprised, since we had had such a bad time there. And I was surprised, because till I spoke I had forgotten the madwoman.

I told her I was just joking.

We picked a park in the city. We would buy barbecued chicken and Thai noodle salad from our favourite deli. We would swim afterward.

Our plotting done, Sarah went to bed. I hadn't seen anything in the papers about strange bodies turning up. Surely if the woman had died, there would have been a report. Maybe she had adapted to the spring. I read once (in a René Dubos book) about an African tribe who had adapted to drinking salt water from a saline spring. The human organism can always be pushed to new limits.

I paced around our apartment. I wanted to drive seventy-five miles and see the spring by three-quarter moonlight. I paced by the bookcase and I picked up *Classical Mythology*. I would relax with the Greek myths – something I hadn't touched since high school twenty years ago. I parked myself on our white plush couch and thumbed through the sections on Hesiod and Ovid. I settled on Silander, a minor Alexandrian poet, whose long poem *Krypticon* dealt with the origin of language, poetry, letters, and prophecy. His work has been connected with sorcery, and he generally enjoys a bad reputation. Book Two (of the twelve) dealt with sacred springs and rivers. Dirce, Castalia, Nilus. I chose the passage on Castalia, the sacred spring near the volcanic vent of Pytho. At Pytho a priestess called the Pythia, sat on a tripod over the miasmic vent. The fumes would intoxicate her and make her utter strange prophecies. It was also the bathing spring of the nine Muses. A sample of Silander's verse was included:

*Mother Ge rent herself,
And strange fumes roiled from the wound.
The great serpent glided forth
To be nursemaid to monstrous Typhon.
In her trail came the holy streams
Where the Nine gather to drink*

*Water of living darkness.
Black water of my scrying bowl.
Ink of poems unwritten.
Before the mysteries of Castalia
I close my eyes with holy dread.*

Hera, incensed that Zeus had borne Athena without the aid of a woman, did conceive Typhon without the aid of man. The young god was monstrous to behold so Hera hid him in a cave. She begged her grandmother to protect the hideous baby. Ge gave birth to Python, who acted as nursemaid. Python's birthwater become the spring Castalia, said to be the mouth of the Styx.

Typhon grew to godhood and went forth to vex and trouble mankind. Python, now lonely, asks her mother Ge for companionship. Ge cannot birth any more monsters, for the age of Chaos is over. Ge, however, sends vapours which reveal the future so that Python might be amused – watching the folly of mankind through the long centuries. Furthermore she caused the stream Castalia to become enchanted so that any who drank of it would become excellent in the arts and sciences. Python grew vast, nourished by the stream. Her coils covered acres of ground, obliterating vineyards and fields. Starving humanity called upon Apollo to slay the monster.

Python knew that the god would kill her. But she knew all of history and this was equivalent to immortality – since there was nothing new for her to experience. The sun god's arrows penetrated her heart, and she died. Apollo returned to high Olympus after establishing his own priesthood at the oracular vapours. The great serpent rotted – for the verb *pytho* means, "I rot." Despite the great stench, the Muses came to drink at the spring for art begins with death. Silander carefully points out that the Nine Muses are neither friends nor enemies of mankind – for just as they taught blind Homer his song, they also taught the Sphinx her riddle. He says that these Unknown Nine merely direct the black streams of mystery – which he also called the sense of wonder – from Hades across the world. They love and reward those that seek after the mysteries, but to those who refuse to embrace the unknown as a lover, they send hideous dreams and tormenting thoughts of "What if?"

I put the book aside. I went into the bedroom and lay beside Sarah. Sleep was a long time in coming.

Tuesday morning I was at my office fifteen minutes early as usual. I like the quiet minutes, when I can organize my day. I pull up my files, send my requests for data throughout the company's worldwide network, and plot my strategies for the day's various problems. I had an idle moment or two. I punched up survey records for Central Texas. We have everywhere including public parks and palace grounds.

The records scrolled across my screen. A survey had been commissioned in 1923. The surveyor was Gabriel Thorn. He had done most of the Texas hill country, but he didn't finish this job. No one had flagged the file and whoever transferred it to tape wasn't bothered that a few acres had escaped company scrutiny. I copied the records on my PC's hard disk and went about my day.

"No one knows."

"What happens if all the balls die?"

"Everything goes rote. Just a working out of likelihoods, after that. The Godballs are pumping out possibilities, twists in the tale. Without them, uh – 'terrible ruination, natch.' Very terrible. I don't know how to explain it to you, girl. Just take my word, that protecting... whatever's left of the Godball... is the most important assignment you'll ever accept."

He was weeping again.

I left him sitting there. Suit thought it was down to about half an hour now before the Assassin reached Halfgone, and he seemed very keyed-up, very excited by the prospect of battle. We walked through the little station, casing it out for defensive positions, memorizing the nooks and crannies, and we left little bits of Suit, with segments of his neural spine, sitting in a few odd places, just to give us an extra edge.

Would there be a fight? With no Godball to kill, would the Assassin amount to anything formidable?

I could only hope so.

When I passed through Yp's room I found the two men huddled together in bed again, and when I left for the airlock Yp followed after me, puppydoglike.

"What are you doing?" he said.

The airlock doors closed behind me. "Preparing maybe to save your butt, that's all."

"Eddy says you're not really human. He said you're just a prisoner of that suit of yours, just a sort of killing machine. A killing machine with tits, is what he said." Yp's tone was both petulant and challenging. He was baiting me. He was also tripping on the Godball, and I gave him some slack.

I looked at him and he smiled, and I smiled back. He had a nice face, and pretty well-formed body, for a lab rat. I leaned forward as though I was going to kiss him, figuring he heard of what happened to Detbar by now.

He jerked backwards, his smile gone.

"Get lost," I said, spitting. He walked backwards to the airlock door, mouthing the words "sorry," but not quite getting it out.

I finished checking out the airlock and went back into the station. Detbar was gone from the kitchen, so I went there to get some protein to refurbish Suit. All they had was awful canned vegetables and vacuum packed soy meat, but once Suit had stoked up I had him convert it for me into a nice chocolate malted, and I was sipping at it when Spanic slithered into the kitchen.

"I'm the one," he said, goggling his eyes.

"What?"

"I feel it," he said. "I think I ate more of the Godball than the others. The Assassin's going to pick me to kill."

"Yummy yummy," I said. "But how do you know the Assassin isn't going to find a way to kill you all?"

"No. I heard you planning it with Detbar. You're going to sacrifice me. It's perfect, isn't it. You want me out of the way." He began literally wringing his hands.

I stared at him, trying not to laugh.

"Look at you. What is that? Chocolate ice cream? Where'd you get that? What kind of a monster are you?"

"Boo," I said.

"It's true, isn't it? And when I'm gone, you and Mitchell will be together."

"You're jealous."

"He's in love with you, I can tell. And Detbar's going along with it. He never liked me –"

"Detbar's thinking about the Godball. And if Mitchell's in love with me he's as dreamed-out as you are. And he is. You're both out of your minds."

"He says you tried to kiss him."

I puckered my lips, and when he sneered I spouted a mouthful of sticky malted onto his shirt.

"Shit!" he said.

"Go ask Detbar if you want. There isn't any conspiracy. I'm here to save the Godball."

Spanic turned and left. I heard him go into Detbar's quarters and babble out his accusations.

I followed, and Spanic, who'd been standing in the doorway, bolted into the room. Detbar was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, his glasses to one side of the bed. "Ms Limetree?" he said.

"None other."

He seemed barely able to put together a sentence, the words dredged up from some bottomless mire. "Eddy... says that you're... interfering between him... and Mr Yp."

"I have to be honest," I said. "Even if you don't count stasis, I haven't been fucked in a while, and Yp is the only one around here who seems like he might be up to it. But, I dunno, Mr Yp is a grown-up adult and all, and I figure it's his business, y'know?"

Spanic glared at me, his pupils huge. Detbar put on his glasses and blinked at me gravely.

"I... Ms Limetree..." said Detbar, "I'm going to come clean about something... I've been sitting here for the longest time... trying to figure out whether you're one of my successes or one of my failures... obviously, I'm taking a great risk telling you this... you're certainly one of my creations, like Mr Spanic and Mr Yp, but it's just that I can't recall dreaming you and so I don't know what I... intended in your case. I mean, you're essentially quite friendly... but you're far more wilful than the others..."

It was beginning to look as if I'd lost Detbar.

"Perhaps you're some kind of composite," he went on. "A creation of my good side that was subsequently altered, corrupted by my self-destructive impulses... or the reverse; perhaps I've salvaged you from the entropic portions of my mind... perhaps I'm in the process of doing that now, by telling you this, for example..."

Suddenly Suit screamed at me. The bit of him I'd left in the airlock.

The Assassin had arrived on Halfgone.

I turned from the doorway in time to see it float through the airlock door and into the corridor. A dark sphere, striped with irregular veins, and bulging fleshily between them. It passed smoothly through the steel door, as though it were made of condensed black air, a malevolent projection rather than something tangible.

I slammed the door to Detbar's quarters shut, closing the two men inside, and Suit sealed up around me and readied himself for battle. He summoned his wayward spine joints and they came quietly creeping